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HQ USPACOM FOR LTC JEN HUGHES AND DR. SUSAN CAMPBELL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/31/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [FJ](#)
SUBJECT: FIJI'S TENTATIVE FIRST STEP AT DIALOGUE

REF: 07 STATE 159935

Classified By: AMBASSADOR C. STEVEN MCGANN FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador C. Steven McGann and Embassy officers met with Dr. Sitiveni "Steven" Halapua of the East-West Center in Hawaii to discuss Halapua's views on the Presidential Political Dialogue Forum meeting he helped facilitate on October 27. The session drew Fijian political leaders of all stripes together in their first meaningful public exchange since the December 2006 coup. Participants agreed to set an agenda and terms of reference for a possible second meeting in five weeks' time to further discussion. An Embassy officer met separately with retired Australian Foreign Service officer Robin Nair who also served as a facilitator. These talks were a cautious start to a political dialogue aimed at establishing a framework for a return to constitutional government. The discussions did not address the underlying causes for the December 2006 coup or reveal any indication that the interim government would return to its promise to hold elections in March 2009. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Halapua described the atmospherics of the meeting. He noted that there is an inner struggle going on within Fiji's ruling Military Council and between some members of the Council and interim Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama. Some of the Council agreed with the interim attorney general's argument that the High Court had legitimized the interim government (IG) in its recent decision denying a challenge to Bainimarama brought by Laisenia Qarase, Fiji's last elected prime minister. The attorney general reportedly argued that the IG can now choose to move slowly, if at all, toward a return to parliamentary democracy. Halapua commented that a strong plea by Presidential Advisor John Samy averted a decision by the IG to abort the October 27 meeting. Participants, Halapua said, appeared to grasp that election reform is the key issue and a timeline for elections the most important next step.

¶3. (C) Halapua noted that Bainimarama is serious about moving this process forward only because he wants to leave behind a legacy built on electoral reforms. He added that he, Nair, and Samy had had three prior meetings with Bainimarama to persuade him not to chair the political dialogue like a military meeting. Bainimarama initially believed that the meeting would require only 30 minutes. The three eventually convinced Bainimarama to be more flexible, inclusive, and to listen. Bainimarama then re-scheduled the meeting for three hours. Halapua said that the two observers from the Military Council, Colonels Pita Driti and Mohammed Aziz, did not appear to support agreement on an election timetable, and Bainimarama did not press for one either. Halapua believed that Bainimarama and team do not know where they are headed with the political dialogue.

¶4. (SBU) In response to a question from Ambassador regarding

whom he should meet in his first days in office, Halapua suggested Catholic Bishop Mataka, Colonels Driti and Aziz, the interim attorney general, and Samy, as these are the people who most influence Bainimarama. In response to questioning, Halapua indicated that Samy is aware that Fiji's economic viability will affect the sustainability of the regime and might be inclined to include benchmarks and timelines leading to new elections.

Ambassador suggested to Halapua that he work with key participants to seek agreement on developing a non-binding discussion paper for the follow-on meeting. Halapua replied that he had not thought of that but liked the suggestion. He agreed to discuss it with Samy and Nair, suggesting that Nair work on summarizing the "commonalities" (i.e., areas of agreement and disagreement) and terms of reference while Halapua works on the discussion paper.

15. (SBU) In a separate meeting, Robin Nair told an Embassy officer that the IG had not expected the dialogue to go as well as it did. The IG had thought that the opposition parties would all gang up against it, but that had not occurred. Nair said that although a number of the parties stressed the need for an early return to elections, none of them mentioned the March 2009 timeline earlier promised by Bainimarama. He commented that Qarase's was the only fully fleshed presentation given by the opposition. Qarase's carefully crafted remarks were conciliatory in tone and supportive of electoral and constitutional reform, saying that he would make these a priority of the next government. With respect to the "People's Charter," Qarase said he would be willing to see it discussed as a priority item by the next parliament. In a major departure from his previous practice, Nair noted that Qarase referred to Bainimarama as "prime minister" rather than "interim prime minister."

16. (SBU) Adding additional flavor, Nair revealed that Former Prime Minister and Fiji Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry also was conciliatory while pressing for elections. Chaudhry supported electoral reform in general but had "some reservations." Opposition Leader Mick Beddoes lauded the meeting as a good start and pressed for an early follow-on meeting. Beddoes had originally intended to dispute the statement included in the meeting's final declaration that recognized the independence of Fiji's judiciary. When Qarase did not challenge the statement, however, Beddoes decided to remain mute instead. Nair said that Bainimarama had originally intended to give his own remarks as Chair of the meeting at the end of the meeting. He instead delivered his largely conciliatory statement at the beginning, which helped set a positive tone for the meeting. Nair stated that Bainimarama considered the fact that having military observers present at the dialogue meeting might result in undesirable optics but decided that it was better having the Military Council inside, rather than outside, the "tent." He also did not want his military advisors to be "faceless."

17. (SBU) According to Nair, the IG discovered before the meeting that the three major opposition parties (Qarase's SDL, Beddoes' UPP, and the NFP) had agreed to a coordinated strategy in the talks; however, said Nair, their subsequent actions during the meeting did not seem to bear that out. He pointed specifically to the lack of a coordinated challenge by Qarase and Beddoes to the collective statement regarding judicial independence, despite opportunities during recesses to work out any differences. When asked whether he thought that some of the political opposition to the IG had caucused before the meeting, Halapua's impression seemed different from Nair's. He said without elaboration that he did believe that to be the case because of their common approaches on some issues.

18. (SBU) The meeting adjourned sine die but with the understanding that it would meet again after approximately five weeks, which would allow Halapua and Nair sufficient time to review the proceedings, transcribe a verbatim record based on sound recordings, draft a paper outlining areas of agreement and disagreement, draft an agreement on terms of reference for the PPDF, and distribute these to participants.

(Comment: The five weeks hiatus also appears to be contrived by the IG for the purpose of allowing Bainimarama and others sufficient time to travel to Brussels and to work on a new budget for the IG. End comment.) Nair said that participants also were asked to bring to the next meeting papers outlining their own concrete proposals.

19. (SBU) Comment: The October 27 meeting was a tentative move forward. Although Bainimarama faced resistance on the part of his attorney general and the Military Council, he decided to go ahead with the dialogue. It is, however, too early to credit the interim government with committing to genuine dialogue. We will meet with the dialogue participants to encourage progress toward reconciliation. End comment.
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